

Reincarnating the spirit of grass

They were the 21 pages that shook the world—the athletic turf world, anyway. “The Tyranny of Phony Fields,” *Sports Illustrated*, August 12, 1985, was one of the first in-depth views of artificial vs. natural athletic fields presented to the general public. Those pages echoed the pain of paralyzed players; talked technically about the turf; and even satirized the issue amidst the hard facts.

One cartoon which sticks in my mind shows a baseball player crying at a headstone. The marker reads, “HERE LIES/GRASS/DIED/MARCH 19, 1966.” On that date, Houston installed the first AstroTurf field in its dome stadium.

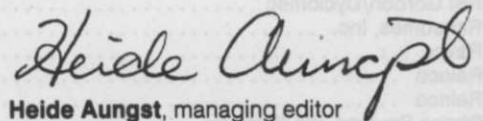
But with the new year comes a new vision for such a cartoon: a spirit rising from the grave with the caption reading, “GRASS/REINCARNATED/1988.” This has nothing to do with the new age-Shirley MacLaine openness to reincarnation. Instead, it signals a new age in athletic turf.

During the last month, I received two phone calls: one from a sports reporter in Boulder, Colo.; the other from a Patriots fan in Foxboro, Mass. Both wanted reprints of *LANDSCAPE MANAGEMENT*'s articles “Sidelined” and “Hard Knocks” on athletic field safety. Both are waging campaigns against artificial turf. Kelly Lyle, the sports writer, wants the University of Colorado to replace its synthetic turf with grass. Debbie DeSantis, the fan, wants Sullivan Stadium to go with natural turf. Lyle's print campaign has, in fact, stalled the decision of the university, until the economics of going with grass can be reviewed. DeSantis, who is concerned for the safety of the players, is just getting her campaign off the ground.

Athletic turf managers on all levels need to take fans, parents and media more seriously. After all, it was a fan, Rose Marie Branson, who, along with the support of the *Toronto Star*, got Toronto to at least consider putting natural turf in the city's new dome. (The stadium commission decided against it.)

This is not just an arbitrary issue which gives fans and sports writers something to talk about. It's one that's important to the athletes as well. Soldier Field in Chicago will return to grass this year, at the request of the Bears. “The injuries to (former Bears cornerback) Les Frazier and (wide receiver) Dennis McKinnon were directly related to (artificial) turf,” Robert Mier, the late Mayor Harold Washington's stadium advisor, told the *Chicago Sun-Times*.

Finally, key people are recognizing the advantages of natural turf. 1988 is not just a new year, but the beginning of a new age: the reincarnation of the spirit of grass.



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